

**State of the Work Report
Board of Bishops
October, 2009**

“History has never seen a time like this.” That has been and could accurately be said of any age. At present, however, there are seismic shifts in the world order and religious landscape that make the statement perhaps more dramatically accurate than in most ages. Roughly 90% of all inventions and innovations in human history have occurred since 1984. Globalization has made the world more accessible, visible and understandable than ever before. The world-wide web has made communication instant, constant, permanent, collaborative, irretrievable, uncensored, accessible and unchallenged. Governments are affected by the uncontrollable and viral use of media. All of this has exacerbated culture wars in some places and reduced cultural tensions in other places. Regarding the first, religious persecution has become more bold, creative and widespread as the global and web-connected media has allowed extreme messages to proliferate. But, the same media has made the increased persecution more visible. Added to these changes, rogue states further challenge world peace. Anarchists are mobilized like never before. Extremism is on the rise in religion, politics and culture. The global economy has been once again rocked soundly. Some “economic experts” wonder if the economy will ever fully recover or will at least be forever changed.

So, where is the church in all of this? The trends are pretty clear. It is marginalized and in steep decline in the U.S. and most of the western world. It is simultaneously in radical, unprecedented growth in many places around the world, particularly in the Far East. A century ago, not even the most perceptive futurist would have guessed that evangelical Christianity in France would be less than 1% and more than 10% in China. Where Christianity is moving well in the U.S. it is in the form of immigrant Christianity, which is changing the landscape of Christianity in America. [This is not to be confused with minority race and ethnic Christianity in the U.S. which is plateaued and in decline depending upon the ethnicity, race and specific location.] The dominant western culture church is most severely affected. Mega churches in the U.S. are on the increase (more than 1,000 with that designation now, up from 130 fifteen years ago.) Nevertheless, the culture is not being seriously impacted by Christianity and many of those in the church do not reflect historic Christian values in lifestyle or practice. The church, some pessimists among us insist, is a closer reflection of the greater culture surrounding the church and keeping pace with social and moral decline.

So, where is the Free Methodist Church in all of this? It is a mixed bag of good and bad, reflecting for the most part the trends across denominational lines. With eyes on Jesus and a commitment to the truth above and around us, the Board of Bishops is keenly aware of the radical pace of world change and the place of the church in it. However, the Board of Bishops is committed to take all measures necessary to help Free Methodists live and act in a manner that is true to the best of what we see in Bible Christianity, revival Christianity and our more recent, denominational history. The Board of Bishops is also committed to address the challenges in ways that the Holy Spirit

would use the church to impact its surrounding cultures. Following are some points highlighting our awareness of the times in which we are living (speaking our reality in truth) and also our resolve to work toward our preferred future.

First, denominations that are primarily concerned about their survival have often found their survival and most certainly their growth to be in jeopardy. This is a key fact of which to be aware. Preserving Free Methodism cannot be our highest aim. If it is, we will likely fail. It is tempting for Christians to retreat to the familiar, the past or what has been effective for us in previous generations. But, that inevitably leads to provincialism, denial and self-absorption. Provincialism and self-absorption cannot lead any institution toward survival in the current global climate. In our present world, the “new Christian” and “un-Christian” alike are not interested in small vision, small scope or internally focused Christianity. Provincialism and colonialism are out. They should be. Partnership and collaboration are in. They should be.

Aware of this, it is significantly important that we identify, partner and celebrate with those who are moving in the right direction, whether or not they fit in our conventional, denominational box or the grist of our theological tradition in its narrowest forms. In the midst of seeking and celebrating partnerships, it is critical that we neither compromise our values nor forsake our unique contribution to the greater body of Christ. We believe that God has put us here for “such a time as this.” So, we must bring to the table food that will nourish the body of Christ. With that balance in mind, we are well underway in increasing our involvement in what the greater body of Christ is doing around the world and in the U.S. One example of this is our inclusion of healthy organizations that have been developed by Free Methodists but had no or limited sanction or recognition by the church. Groups like Heavenly Treasures, Eden Reforestation Projects, Empowering Lives International, Clear Blue Project and Sister Connection are getting press, face time and recognition by the Free Methodist Church in ways that they have never enjoyed and celebrated. In fact, in a conversation with two leaders from the list above, one said, “I feel for the first time that this ministry matters to my ministry family.” Though they are not officially limited to the Free Methodist Church in their funding sources or source of volunteers, they are part of our family and need to lead us in some valuable areas of ministry where their expertise is vitally important in our commitment to “preach the gospel to the poor” and care about that for which Jesus cares. Kathy Gaulton (Director of Heavenly Treasures) has been officially recognized as a Free Methodist missionary- accountable to Free Methodist World Missions (FMWM) in character and ministry, but not restricted by FMWM to innovate and collaborate as the Heavenly Treasures board is allowed complete autonomy. It is a new category, one that we are not only willing to explore, but expand.

Another recent example is the exciting leadership offered by one of our pastors, Brandon Hatmaker, to the greater body of Christ in the U.S. There is a new and unique collaborative conversation regarding how to rapidly multiply the church in America. An interesting collection of people in the dialogue include leaders of very powerful and visible groups: some of the largest mega church pastors in America, Zondervan executives, Missio executives, Exponential, Catalyst, and Leadership Network are

attempting to raise an army of new generation leaders to saturate our culture with the good news and innovative church plants that are born to multiply. They want to put their resources behind this effort in an unprecedented and cooperative venture. One national church leader suggested that 100 mega churches commit \$1,000,000 each to this venture. This group recently met and has asked Brandon to be the point person in developing a network of potentially thousands of church planters. In my conversation with Brandon he seriously asked, "Bishop, are you and the Free Methodist Church prepared to support an avalanche of quality leaders (perhaps hundreds every year) who are looking for a ministry family and share our theology and core convictions?" My answer was a resounding, "Yes, we will make that a high priority, God being our helper." A follow-up question was, "Do you want to be part of this next conversation as it unfolds in our next meeting in Chicago?" My answer might surprise some and even disappoint others. I said, "No! And, at this point, I would hope that no denomination comes to the table in more than a relational, background, advisory role as I am providing for you now. This is gaining momentum that will be instantly squelched if a single ministry family brings its biases to the table. It will more certainly be squelched if competing theological traditions have too much competing voice in the process. Our world needs Jesus first. We want to support the effort, not control it."

By collaboration and partnership, we need to see that we are not functionally or structurally prepared to do everything that needs to be done in the world. But, we can grow in our contribution and partner with those who are functionally and structurally prepared to do great work. In time, we will then not only be contributors to partnerships, but leaders in developing partnerships with other denominations and Christian groups around the world.

Second, we no longer see ourselves (FMCNA) as the primary ministry contributors around the world to the Kingdom and even the Free Methodist Church in our own backyard. A flood of willing missionaries from other countries added to the new wave of refugees from Arabic, Asian and African countries are coming to our shores and leading much of the ministry growth in the North American Free Methodist Church. The shifts in globalization have given us the opportunity to become recipients of ministry to complement our historic role as the primary sender of missionaries. Instead of passively receiving the contribution, we are becoming more active in fostering it.

Similarly, we are unapologetic about fostering new relationships with many churches and groups in order to bring them through the affiliation process with greater speed and attention. We have much to offer the world. We are unashamed about that. We welcome those who share our vision and theology to accomplish greater good in the world. In other words, we are not only building partnerships outside of the Free Methodist Church, but expanding our family to include those of like mind, spirit and vision. We are not only trying to expand and extend the Free Methodist family through the conventional target efforts of evangelism and church planting. We are also trying to expand and extend the Free Methodist family through the less historically conventional efforts of hosting missionaries, welcoming affiliations of churches and pastors and inviting similar minded Christians to our table in the process.

Third, we are committed to have church metrics that will better reflect our values and help us assess our progress and effectiveness. Currently, our denominational metrics do not aid us in determining the fulfillment of our values. We count Sunday worship attendance, money, baptisms, conversions, Sunday school attendance and members in our local churches. The problem is that most of our churches do not have a Sunday School. Many of them do not have worship services on Sunday. In fact, many of them do not have worship services on a weekly basis. Conversions and baptisms are measurements of entrance into the Kingdom not holiness. But, we are a holiness denomination, concerned about growth, personal and social holiness in behavior and character. Dollars are important. But, in our growing commitment to urban ministry, that can no longer be a primary, qualitative indicator of our ministry strength or progress toward missional goals.

In short, our vision can only be taken seriously if we have some way of assessing our progress toward our vision. Our vision is that we aim to be a church that is marked by “healthy, biblical community of holy people multiplying disciples, leaders, groups and churches.” But, our metrics do not help us measure our vision values of health, biblicentricity, commitment to holiness, multiplication of disciples, leaders, groups and churches. We measure converts, not disciple multiplication. We measure church plants mostly as a conference activity instead of a local church expectation. Leadership development is only measured by numbers of CMCs and not true development and deployment of all called and gifted leaders.

As a result of the denominational metric history, most of our conferences are using other, randomly selected tools to determine health, growth and focus of their churches. The tools from Natural Church Development, Leadership Network, Reveal, Strengths Finder, CRN et. al. are the kinds of tools that Annual Conferences are using to get a better handle on church health and growth while aiding the church in constructive assessment and strategic reformation. While these are good, we need to have a better way of corporately telling our story while evaluating the story we tell. Numbers matter. Counting the right numbers matters profoundly.

Fourth, it is our desire to maximize all resources available. The Commission on Leadership Development is working diligently with the Board of Bishops to raise up leaders in a more intentional, thorough and rapid way. The National Student Ministries Team is sharing the commitment to raise up a new generation of leaders even from among our teens. We cannot grow and expand by only training clergy leaders. We can no longer commit ourselves to only develop those leaders who self-identify their gifting and take painstaking initiative to self-develop. Maximizing our leadership resources will allow us to more fully demonstrate our contribution to the world.

In the same way, the idea of shifting the General Conference event itself to a resourcing event is an effort to maximize our leadership resourcing to do what God has called us to do. We can no longer afford to gather together every four years primarily to alter or improve a book (Book of Discipline). We must gather together more frequently and at

least every four years in our quadrennial meeting to change our culture and the world. We have quality, God-ordained, God-gifted leadership that have much to say and much to hear and much to engage in building the church. By maximizing the resources of leadership, ideas and partnerships among our Conferences and local churches, we will accomplish more than our structure and initiative of our bishops could fathom.

The reality of maximizing resources leads to some pain. The commitment to bring FMWM operations into FMCNA Home in funding has caused everyone to tighten the belt and feel some pain. Bishop Kendall and Dale Hill along with the Operating Committee have done the heavy lifting in this arena. The commitment to streamline the finance efforts has led to consolidating departments which has led to some pain. Putting the World Ministry Center up for sale has led to some consternation and real pain (archive concerns, sentimental attachments, warehousing, IT, moving volumes of equipment and material). Merging conferences together to maximize resources and leadership efforts has led to some pain and a sense of loss to some. We are aware of the pain produced by maximizing and channeling our resources for the long term health of the FMCNA. But, that is what we all desire- the best use of our resources, maximized for the long term health and growth of the FMCNA. We desire to be a God-breathed movement again.

The world is changing for better or worse. We are changing for better. The world needs the good news of Jesus Christ. We are striving to better convey the good news of Jesus Christ. There are great organizations with whom to partner. We are striving to be better partners. The current economy demands a serious look at how we use our resources. We are working to use our resources better. The world needs to see Christ incarnated in his people. We are committed to becoming better disciples for the world to experience. We do not need more churches. In fact, we could do with fewer churches that are not making disciples. We only need more churches if those churches are transformational and multiplying communities. And, we are committed to grow to become transformational and multiplying communities that are commonplace in the Free Methodist Church. We desire and aim to see more and more churches to be commonly known as places where fruit-bearing and the presence of the Holy Spirit are tied closely with the name Free Methodist.